

# Sheboygan Press.

LOCAL

## An investigation found former Sheboygan city administrator's conduct may have violated city policies. He is suing, claiming he was targeted.



**Kelli Arseneau**

Sheboygan Press

Published 5:03 a.m. CT April 10, 2023

SHEBOYGAN – An investigation into former Sheboygan City Administrator Todd Wolf found sufficient evidence that Wolf's conduct while responding to personnel issues after August may have violated the city's policies.

Wolf was fired in January, following the investigation's completion.

The investigation, conducted by Attorney Jill Hall, took place in November, with some follow-up communication in January. A six-page summary report of the investigation was completed Feb. 6. The council hired Hall to investigate complaints against Wolf, including a complaint of retaliation and defamation by a city director, and allegations Wolf made of bribery and extortion.

The report says there was sufficient evidence to warrant a hearing before the city council for consideration of terminating Wolf or taking other disciplinary action. On Jan. 9, the Sheboygan City Council voted 8-2 to fire Wolf without cause. Firing Wolf without cause — rather than for cause, which would involve a hearing process — saved the city money and helped “minimize the negative impact on both Wolf and other city employees,” according to the city council resolution.

When Wolf was fired, Sheboygan Mayor Ryan Sorenson said he hoped the report would be made public "sooner than later" and that once it was released, people would "understand the difficult decision" the council had to make.

In February, Wolf filed a lawsuit against 13 people, including Sorenson and Hall, in connection with his firing in January. He alleges the investigation into his conduct was launched "without any legitimate justification."

In a document augmenting Hall's report, Wolf states the investigation report was dated the same day he filed his lawsuit, and he alleges the report and its public release was a form of "retaliation" against him for taking legal action. He denied any wrongdoing.

Sheboygan City Attorney Charles Adams, who is also named in Wolf's lawsuit, said the report was not publicly published, but as a public record it is available upon request.

Two members of the Sheboygan Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging Initiative filed claims for \$20,000 each in damages alleging defamatory statements made by Wolf. The city denied these claims.

## **What prompted the investigation?**

Wolf was placed on administrative leave in November following concerns about his response to personnel issues.

The controversy stemmed from an incident in August, when, during an internal meeting among city directors, Director of Planning and Development Chad Pelishek said the N-word while quoting a resident's comment from a neighborhood meeting.

The incident did not come to public attention until October, after the Sheboygan Press reported on it.

Wolf told the Sheboygan Press at that time Pelishek said the racial slur while discussing a racist incident brought to his attention. Pelishek asked other department heads about how the city can help address racial issues at the neighborhood level, Wolf said.

Immediately after the August meeting, Wolf sent an email to department heads apologizing for not immediately correcting a "misstep from a team member" but that the statement made at the meeting was not intended to be offensive. He also requested that department heads not discuss "departmental interactions" with other people.

Residents expressed concerns that Wolf's main concern after the meeting was not that a city leader said a racial slur, but that a director breached trust by sharing what happened with people who were not involved in the meeting.

In October, the city council decided to limit Wolf's responsibilities, including handing communication and media relations tasks over to the mayor.

After multiple closed-session council meetings addressing personnel issues over three weeks, Wolf wrote a letter to the city council claiming that in an Oct. 5 meeting with Jamie Haack and Alexandra Guevara, two steering committee members of the Sheboygan DEIB, Haack and Guevara demanded \$70,000 for their organization and threatened to "publicly oppose" Wolf if he didn't comply.

Haack and Guevara, in response, issued a joint statement saying Wolf's allegations about them were "simply not true." They said the meeting in actuality was "polite and cordial," and they suggested to Wolf that the city consider hiring diversity, equity and inclusion experts and a Human Resources director with knowledge and experience in diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives.

On Nov. 7, hours after Wolf sent the city council his letter, the council voted 8-2 to place Wolf on paid administrative leave, while the investigation was conducted.

The two votes against Wolf's termination were from council members Joe Heidemann and Trey Mitchell. Both Heidemann and Mitchell declined to comment for this story because of ongoing litigation.

Throughout fall 2022, Wolf was the designated person to address complaints, because the city was without a Human Resources director. The former director, Vicky Schneider, resigned in June after she sued the city, alleging Wolf retaliated against her for questioning the city's response to sexual harassment of a female city employee, according to her complaint filed with the state Department of Workforce Development. However, Wolf's actions alleged in Schneider's lawsuit were not addressed in Hall's investigation.

The city has denied Schneider's complaint. The state found probable cause that Wolf retaliated against Schneider, which advances the case to either a settlement agreement or an evidentiary hearing presided over by an administrative law judge. The DWD confirmed April 7 that the case is still open and a hearing is scheduled for Aug. 28-30.

## **What did the investigation report reveal?**

Before the report was released, the city had shared little information about the specifics of the investigation.

According to the report, Wolf engaged in conduct that could be considered a violation of city policies by "... failing to comply with specific Council directives, and disregarding legal recommendations of the City Attorney and outside counsel, all not to discuss pending personnel matters."

The investigation found that in September, Adams and private lawyers advised Wolf that he did not need to talk with media, and if he chose to, "he should not comment on personnel matters." However, Wolf spoke with the Sheboygan Press during two separate interviews in September about the meeting where Pelishek repeated the racial slur and about possible discipline regarding a director who shared that information with people outside the meeting.

Further, the report states that Wolf's claims that Haack and Guevara engaged in extortion and bribery are "entirely unsupported in fact." The investigation found sufficient evidence to warrant the council's consideration that these accusations "constituted insubordinate and inappropriate comment against citizens, and created possible legal risk for the City, all in violation of numerous City policies," the report says.

The investigation also found evidence that Wolf publicly "ascribed unsubstantiated conduct and malicious political motives" to a city director and made comments that they should be disciplined, the report says.

A Nov. 8 news release from Wolf's attorney, Jennifer DeMaster, names the city director and states they "demanded" Pelishek repeat the full phrase that included the N-word at the August meeting and then afterward "contacted multiple people in her political network to distort the facts and target Pelishek and Wolf." Wolf and his attorney continued to make similar public comments about the city director within the following month, the report says.

However, the investigation found the director spoke about the racial slur incident to five friends right after the meeting on Aug. 22, but never spoke with media about it. And the report says during the investigation, "no attendee of the August 22, 2022 meeting, including Mr. Pelishek himself, supported Wolf's repeated assertion that (the director) 'demanded that Mr. Pelishek repeat the racial slur.'"

The report also states that the investigation found no evidence to support Wolf's allegations that the city director had political motives against Wolf.

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## **How has Wolf responded?**

When Adams received record requests for copies of the investigation report, the city reached out to Wolf to notify him of its intent to release the document, as is required under state law. In response, Wolf filed a document augmenting the record. The document, which anyone who requests copies of the report receives as well, contains a letter from Wolf and his lawsuit complaint.

In Wolf's letter, he says the investigation report "contains several false statements and is a fabricated narrative meant to further harm my reputation" and is "nothing more than retaliation to punish me for filing a lawsuit against them for violations of my constitutional rights."

Wolf further states he "can readily and easily prove that most of Ms. Hall's 'factual allegations' are false."

Wolf's lawsuit names Sorenson, Adams, Hall, Sheboygan Press reporter Maya Hilty, Sheboygan Area School District President Mary Lynne Donohue, council members Barbara Felde, Roberta Filicky-Peneski, Amanda Salazar, Angela Ramey, Betty Ackley, Zachary Rust, Dean Dekker, Grazia Perrella, as well as the city of Sheboygan, as defendants.

In the complaint, DeMaster alleges the Sheboygan DEIB in 2021 "installed certain individuals into trusted positions on the Common Council, the Mayoral seat, and one reporter at a local newspaper." Sheboygan DEIB-affiliated elected officials then worked together "to destroy Mr. Wolf's reputation with fabricated allegations and remove him as City Administrator without any chance for due process," the complaint states.

Wolf is requesting compensatory damages for "lost income and benefits, severe mental

and emotional distress, loss of reputation, humiliation and inconvenience," as well as punitive damages against the defendants. He also requests declarations that the defendants violated his First Amendment rights and his 14th Amendment due process rights, and a trial by jury.

No court proceedings related to the lawsuit have yet been scheduled.

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# milwaukee journal sentinel

## LOCAL

# Former Sheboygan human resources director alleges she was retaliated against for opposing sexual harassment in the workplace



**Maya Hilty**

Sheboygan Press

Published 5:28 a.m. CT Oct. 27, 2022

SHEBOYGAN - In February, Sheboygan's then human resources director filed a complaint with the state alleging the city administrator organized "hostility" against her in retaliation for her opposing sexual harassment of another city employee.

As of earlier this month, the case was still under investigation by Wisconsin's Equal Rights Division, according to the Department of Workforce Development.

"Since this is an ongoing investigation, I am not allowed to discuss anything further regarding this topic," Mayor Ryan Sorenson said in a statement. "I take this situation very seriously."

City Administrator Todd Wolf did not respond to a request for comment.

**More:** 'People are angry': Sheboygan residents, elected officials respond to city administrator's handling of director repeating a racial slur

**More:** Sheboygan council approves \$15 minimum wage for city employees, but it may not apply to library workers. Here's what to know.

## Former director alleges city administrator 'steadily ostracized' her

In February 2021, a police officer with the Sheboygan Police Department told the city's director of Human Resources and Labor Relations, Vicky Schneider, that she was being retaliated against for opposing sexual harassment. Schneider filed a complaint with the EEOC in February 2022, alleging she was retaliated against for opposing sexual harassment.

Case 2:23-cv-01048-WED Filed 03/04/25 Page 7 of 34 Document 128-4

sexually harassed and discriminated against by male officers and supervisors in the department, according to the female police officer's complaint filed with the state Department of Workforce Development.

"The extent of the allegations and the personnel involved in them was not fully known" by Schneider until late July 2021, she wrote in her own complaint filed with the state.

"Between this time in late July 2021 and through September 2021, I expressed serious concerns regarding and openly questioned the sufficiency of the respondent's remedial efforts to address the sexual harassment and other inappropriate sexual behavior involving City employees," Schneider wrote.

In her complaint, Schneider said Wolf told her not to let the situation "taint" her.

"Thereafter, I have seen my role marginalized and have been steadily ostracized by the city administrator," she wrote. "He has instructed members of my own staff to spy on me and report anything that could advance his obvious plan to set me up for failure," she alleged.

Schneider alleges Wolf excluded her from meetings and that he "worked to undermine my authority by implying that I was not qualified, I was struggling, or any number of insinuations," she wrote in her resignation letter addressed to the city council, Wolf and Sorenson in May.

In early November 2021, Schneider hired an attorney to protect herself against what she alleged was workplace retaliation, which "escalated significantly over the months of September, October, and into November, such that it negatively affected my physical and mental health," she wrote in her resignation letter.

She alleges city leadership was "well aware" of her experience, including that Sorenson said she had a "target" on her back from the city administrator.

As a result of the alleged retaliation, Schneider took medical leave at the end of November until it was exhausted toward the end of March 2022.

"As no significant change was offered or implemented to allow me to return to work safely over the past six months, I find that I must resign my position," she wrote.

"I want each of you to know that I truly enjoyed my work for the City of Sheboygan, and am sad that it is ending in this manner. It was a privilege to serve the community in which I raised my children and continue to enjoy its many services, parks, and natural beauty."

According to Schneider's attorney, Peter Fox, an initial determination of whether retaliation occurred had not yet been made in her case as of earlier this month.

**More:** Sheboygan County deputy faced firing after investigation that opened soon after he announced run for sheriff. Here's what we know.

## **Here's Sheboygan's policy on responding to allegations of sexual harassment**

According to Sheboygan's employee handbook, any complaints of harassment should be referred from a supervisor to the department head and human resources director.

"We investigate all allegations brought to our attention," Sorenson said.

Under the direction of the human resources director, an investigation will ensure that all facts are reviewed and documented and appropriate disciplinary action is taken, if warranted.

Any employee found to have violated the harassment policy will be subject to disciplinary action, up to and including firing, and corrective action must be taken if the investigation determines other city employees are affected by or participated in the harassment.

The city "forbids retaliation" against anyone who reports or assists in the investigation of an alleged harassment complaint, and anyone who retaliates is subject to appropriate disciplinary action up to and including firing, according to the policy.

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# Sheboygan Press.

## LOCAL

# Sheboygan city council puts city administrator on leave and opens an investigation into his conduct



**Maya Hilty**

Sheboygan Press

Published 5:17 a.m. CT Nov. 9, 2022 | Updated 9:50 a.m. CT Nov. 10, 2022

SHEBOYGAN - The city council has placed City Administrator Todd Wolf on paid administrative leave less than a month after the Sheboygan Press reported his controversial response to a personnel issue.

The administrative leave is "for the purpose of investigating allegations and concerns regarding (Wolf's) conduct," city council President Barb Felde said Monday. The city attorney will hire outside counsel to conduct the investigation.

The council made the decision in an 8-2 vote, with Trey Mitchell and Joe Heidemann voting against the motion. Heidemann said he was unavailable for an interview on Tuesday. Mitchell declined to comment given his "longstanding rule" of declining to comment on personnel matters.

Mayor Ryan Sorenson said he cannot comment further on what concerns were brought to the city council's attention because it is an ongoing investigation.

"Investigation will be fair and impartial, and the results will be presented to the Common Council for their review," Sorenson said in a prepared statement. "Administrative leave is not disciplinary but allows the investigation to occur quickly and fully. The City will not provide further comment on what is, ultimately, a personnel matter."

Wolf referred news reporters to his attorney, Jennifer DeMaster, for further information, according to a news release DeMaster emailed to media outlets.

"This is a political power grab by Mayor Ryan Sorenson and his political allies to have unfettered access to taxpayer money to hand out with zero oversight to whomever he wants,"

DeMaster said in the release.

The release alleges Wolf refused an "extortion threat" by members of a Sheboygan community group in early October to "give the City approved diversity experts." The release alleges the group allied with elected officials to suspend Wolf "to remove the obstacle to their \$70,000 demand."

The news release includes no details to support the allegation. The mayor said Wolf's statements, through his attorney, are untrue.

"My personal opinion is that the statements that the administrator made are false, and it is sad to see how this has turned out and how it is evolving," Sorenson said. "The city is committed to doing the work that our constituents expect us to do."

According to DeMaster, Wolf has been instructed not to access city facilities or communicate with city employees.

As the highest-paid city employee, Wolf earns \$75.88 per hour, or approximately \$13,150 per month. The city administrator is selected by and reports to the city council. The city administrator is responsible for supervising and directing day-to-day administration of city government, implementing city council policies, preparing the annual city budget and providing long-term planning and leadership for the city.

## **Wolf put on leave after residents raised concerns**

The city council's decision to put Wolf on administrative leave follows multiple closed-session council meetings on personnel issues in the past three weeks. The public notices for those meetings do not identify Wolf as the subject of the specific issues, but they came after the Sheboygan Press on Oct. 10 reported on the city administrator's response to city planning and development director Chad Pelishek repeating a racial slur in an internal meeting.

Wolf told the Sheboygan Press at the time that Pelishek "thought he was in a safe space" when he used the N-word in a meeting of city department heads to repeat what a resident had said at a neighborhood meeting. Wolf was instead "disappointed" in a different director who told a city council member about the incident.

In response, some residents asked council members to reevaluate Wolf's position as city administrator and investigate sexual harassment and workplace retaliation in the city.

Sheboygan's former human resources director, Vicky Schneider, filed a complaint with the state in February alleging Wolf organized "hostility" against her after she opposed sexual harassment of a female police officer. The state's investigation of Schneider's complaint was ongoing as of late last month.

**More:** Sheboygan council approves \$15 minimum wage for city employees. Here's what to know.

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## **Wolf's attorney denounces city council decision in fiery news release**

In a news release, Wolf's attorney said the council suspended Wolf "*without* cause, reasons, or justification and then threatened an investigation into him based on allegations that he has no knowledge of." DeMaster, the attorney, said the suspension "is sure to go down as one of the most politically underhanded moves the City of Sheboygan has ever seen."

The release alleges Wolf was targeted by members of a community group that works to promote diversity and inclusion, as well as a city director.

"Todd Wolf opposes and refuses to cave to bribery, corruption, threats, political favors, wasting of taxpayer dollars, and discrimination practices at City Hall; and his statements led to his immediate suspension, escorting out of the building and threats from Common Council as they handed over his power of Sheboygan taxpayer money to Mayor Ryan Sorenson," the release stated.

"Council and their activist friends will not tolerate anyone who tries to protect the taxpayers and the City — like City Administrator Wolf has."

DeMaster is a Grafton lawyer who was fired from her job as an assistant city attorney in Milwaukee in February after she gave an interview to Russia Today TV in which she justified Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine.

Sorenson did not have an estimate of how long the investigation may take.

The Sheboygan Press is seeking to arrange an interview with DeMaster to ask more about Wolf's allegations.

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# Sheboygan Press.

## LOCAL

# Sheboygan's city administrator has earned over \$15K since being put on paid leave. His attorney alleges city leaders conspired against him.



**Maya Hilty**

Sheboygan Press

Published 5:00 a.m. CT Dec. 16, 2022

SHEBOYGAN - Sheboygan City Administrator Todd Wolf is still on paid leave more than a month after the city council put him on administrative leave pending an investigation into his conduct.

City leaders have provided little information about the investigation, saying it is a personnel matter, and Mayor Ryan Sorenson said he does not know when the investigation is expected to finish.

Wolf's attorney, Jennifer DeMaster, said she is "unable to comment" on concerns voiced by residents about Wolf's response to personnel issues in the weeks before his suspension.

DeMaster instead alleges in a news release that Wolf was suspended after two members of a Sheboygan community group promoting diversity and inclusion targeted him, in collusion with city elected officials, because Wolf refused to give them money to hire diversity consultants for the city.

DeMaster and Wolf's accounts have some inconsistencies and factual inaccuracies.

In a joint written statement, the two community members, Alexandra Guevara and Jamie Haack, said Wolf's allegations "are simply not true."

The statement says Guevara and Haack "at no point" asked for money — at a meeting Wolf set up with them — or worked with elected officials to "target" Wolf.

Some people rallied behind Wolf at a meeting of the Republican Party of Sheboygan County he attended in late November.

As the highest-paid city employee, Wolf earns about \$600 a day and has earned more than \$15,000 since being put on leave last month.

Here's what we know about Wolf's administrative leave and his allegations.

## Wolf was put on leave as a result of concerns about his conduct, city leaders say

The city council voted 8-2 to put Wolf on leave "for the purpose of investigating allegations and concerns regarding his conduct," city council president Barb Felde said.

Mayor Sorenson declined to comment on what concerns prompted the investigation, citing the ongoing investigation.

The suspension came three weeks after some residents called Wolf's leadership into question — publicly and in emails to the council — following the Sheboygan Press reporting on Wolf's response to a city director repeating a racial slur in an internal meeting.

Some residents also raised concerns about Sheboygan's lack of a human resources director and allegations of sexual harassment and retaliation in the city.

The former human resources director resigned in June after filing a complaint with the state Equal Rights division alleging Wolf retaliated against her for opposing sexual harassment in the police department.

On Nov. 10, a few days after Wolf was placed on leave, the state found probable cause that Wolf discriminated against the former human resources director. An administrative law judge will eventually hear the case. A date for the hearing had not been set as of early this month.

The city hired outside attorney Jill Hall on Nov. 14 to investigate Wolf's conduct.

"There are many components and allegations that need to be addressed by the investigator, so we can not provide a defined dated timeline for it," Sorenson said in a statement. "We hope that the investigation will be wrapped up soon."

City attorney Chuck Adams said he does not yet know if the results of the investigation will be made public.

## **Wolf's attorney says he was suspended because he refused a political extortion threat**

DeMaster said Wolf "has no knowledge" of allegations against him, characterizing his suspension as a "sudden" and "politically underhanded" move, though Wolf's emails suggest he was aware of some allegations against him.

Wolf wrote in an email to city council the day he was suspended, prior to the council meeting, that he faced "false accusations" in the press and publicly. He also sent the council an eight-page list of his accomplishments as city administrator for their "convenience."

DeMaster did not comment on what false accusations Wolf allegedly faced, saying city leaders prohibited him from speaking on city matters.

Wolf and DeMaster instead allege that two members of the Sheboygan DEIB, a community group promoting diversity, equity and inclusion, worked with elected officials to remove Wolf after he refused a demand for \$70,000 to hire diversity consultants for the city.

Wolf's and DeMaster's accounts of the meeting at which the community members allegedly demanded money, in early October, differ.

DeMaster's news release says Wolf had the meeting arranged "following internal pressure from the Mayor and certain Alderpersons."

Wolf's email to the council says: "In late August and September 2022"— presumably after an incident in which a director said a racial slur in an internal meeting Aug. 22 — "I made several calls with DEIB leaders in the community and was referred to the 'Sheboygan DEIB' group, where a City employee set up a meeting with 'Sheboygan DEIB' reps ...

"I expected at this meeting to be provided with solutions, a business proposal, strategies or a list of trusted experts

to retain for DEIB training,” Wolf wrote.

Wolf alleged the community members “immediately” asked for money and threatened to oppose Wolf unless he paid them.

He “swiftly left the meeting after the women began yelling,” DeMaster’s news release alleges.

While DeMaster’s news release alleges the members of the community group demanded \$70,000 at the initial meeting, Wolf said in his email to the city council that he only later learned the amount. DeMaster declined to comment on how Wolf allegedly later learned the group was requesting the amount of \$70,000.

Guevara and Haack said in a statement that Wolf’s accusations are false. They said city employees invited them to meet over lunch at the Black Pig Restaurant, and two other city employees besides Wolf attended the meeting.

DeMaster's news release confirmed the meeting took place Oct. 5, but she said she is unable to comment on where the meeting took place and who else was present.

Guevara and Haack's statement said that at the meeting, “City officials stated they were interested in incorporating DEI practices at the City level to better address situations related to racism and sexual harassment.”

“We clarified that the Sheboygan DEIB Steering Committee does not provide consulting services. ... To help the City achieve its goals, we suggested that the City might consider hiring DEI consultants to assist generally with its ongoing DEI work. We also suggested that the City consider hiring an HR director who had DEI knowledge and experience,” Guevara and Haack’s statement said.

“We never ‘demanded’ that the City hire such consultants, we did not offer consulting services — either individually or on behalf of Sheboygan DEIB — and we never asked to be compensated in any way,” the statement said. “The lunch was polite and cordial; there was never any screaming or aggressive behavior by anyone.”

Wolf alleges in his email to the council that following the meeting, the community members “(made) good on their threats” to him by informing the Sheboygan Press of the August incident in which a city director said a racial slur, saying the Sheboygan Press was not aware of the incident until early October.

Wolf’s allegation is false because the Sheboygan Press had already interviewed Wolf, as well as other city leaders, about the racial slur incident in September, weeks before Wolf’s Oct. 5 meeting with Guevara and Haack.

DeMaster said she was “unable to comment” on the fact that Wolf’s allegation that community members went to the media to target him publicly after his meeting with them is based on false information.

Although DeMaster’s news release alleges the community members colluded with elected officials to remove Wolf, she later said she did not know if that was true.

“Sometimes there’ll be a couple people that have a little screw loose or two, that want to come out and demand these things or make threats, and that’s fine,” DeMaster said at a Nov. 28 Republican Party of Sheboygan County meeting, where she gave a “rundown” of Wolf’s situation.

“The problem is ... whether those people in the community are working with elected officials to try to get rid of the thorn in their side (Todd Wolf) that is saying no to this, and we don’t know that,” she said. “We expect to get information about this, but we don’t know.”

## **Wolf levels new allegations against a city director**

In two prior interviews about the incident, Wolf told a reporter that city Director of Planning and Development Chad Pelishek said the N-word in an August meeting of department heads, while saying that a resident had said the slur at a neighborhood meeting and asking fellow staff how the city can help address such situations.

"Chad brought up the fact that he was up against some racial slurs, and he did use the phrase, not with the intent to hurt or harm anyone, but with the intent to help others understand," Wolf said in September. "When he said it, he thought he was in a safe space — and obviously one person (another director) let that out to their friends group. But she did not make a comment, she did not address it at the time."

Wolf later alleged in his email to the council that Pelishek did not say the slur until the other director "demanded" he tell her what racial slur was said.

In a Nov. 7 email to the council, Wolf asked for the council's support in writing up the female director.

Many city directors were present at the meeting at which Pelishek said the slur. All directors contacted by the Sheboygan Press in September declined to comment.

## **Wolf and attorney rally support from county Republican Party**

DeMaster's news release contains allegations of "egregious corruption" in the city and other claims.

For example, the news release said the city council "snuck in late at night an oral motion to immediately suspend" Wolf "within hours" of him reporting his concerns of an extortion threat to the city, calling it a "secretive measure" and saying "his statements led to his immediate suspension."

As is routine, the council meeting agenda was distributed by the City Clerk's Office days prior and noted the city council may act on closed-session personnel matters.

In emails with a reporter, DeMaster questioned the authenticity of a copy of Wolf's Nov. 7 email to the council, obtained through a public records request, saying a reporter's questions referencing the email were "premised on false/fake made up implications of records" and that Wolf's email was something a reporter seemed to have "made up out of thin air."

DeMaster said the email was confidential and should not have been released as a public record.

At a Republican Party of Sheboygan County meeting, DeMaster posed Wolf's suspension as a threat to transparency over taxpayer dollars and an attack from "cancel-culture type people."

"The Republican Party as a whole agrees that equality is important, diversity is important," DeMaster said. "The problem is when it goes to the point of being insidious, divisive and that becomes the discriminatory faction because that's what's happening with some of these people."

She added: "As Todd kept getting more and more just inundated with things he wasn't allowed to say because of his race, because of his gender, ... because of what you look like, you're not allowed to say these kinds of terms ... these kinds of situations created a very difficult work environment."

She added, "There are good, great city employees right here in Sheboygan that are having to go through and seeing these things happen and they just want to do their job and Todd was the one that has been protecting them."

Wolf has said he supports diversity, equity and inclusion since he was hired as city administrator.

Wolf attended the party meeting and was applauded, but did not speak.

Republican Party chairman Russ Otten said at the meeting the party would set up a “defense fund” for Wolf.

A GiveSendGo fund to “help cover legal and living costs” for Wolf’s family, which alleges Wolf has been “victimized by a group of WOKE radicals,” had raised \$3,850 as of Thursday.

**More:**Cities are rarely liable for damage from potholes. That can be a harsh reality for people injured, like this Sheboygan woman.

**More:**Sheboygan increases fines for harassing election officials. 'It's about election integrity,' city council member says.

## **What does the city administrator do?**

The city administrator is appointed by and works under the direction of the city council, with input from the mayor.

The city administrator is responsible for managing day-to-day operation of city government, including implementing council policies, developing the annual budget, supervising all department heads and leading long-term planning for the city.

Sheboygan’s city council created the city administrator position in 2011. The city had long debated the change and implemented it almost unanimously soon after then-mayor Bob Ryan again came under scrutiny for repeated allegations of heavy drinking, according to Sheboygan Press articles from 2011.

City elected officials believed the city administrator would provide more consistency in city administration, improve communication among departments and between elected officials and department heads, remove some politics from decision-making and allow for more long-term planning, according to the report from a 2010 study contracted by the city.

Wolf is Sheboygan’s third city administrator, hired by the council in June 2020, after the prior administrator, Darrell Hofland, announced his retirement. Wolf was city council president at the time, having served on the council for five years, and worked as a business development manager at Curt G. Joa Inc.

According to city ordinance, the city administrator can be removed only for cause by a four-fifths vote of the common council. That means the vote of eight of the 10 council members is required to remove an administrator for inefficiency, neglect of duty, official misconduct or malfeasance in office.

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# Sheboygan Press.

**LOCAL**

## **Sheboygan city administrator fired after investigation. His supporters want details why.**

**Maya Hilty**

Sheboygan Press

Published 8:26 a.m. CT Jan. 10, 2023 | Updated 10:11 a.m. CT Jan. 10, 2023

SHEBOYGAN - Sheboygan fired city administrator Todd Wolf at a crowded city council meeting Monday.

The council voted to put Wolf on administrative leave in early November and hired an outside attorney to investigate concerns about his conduct.

The attorney finished her investigation and presented a preliminary report to the council last week, council Vice President Roberta Filicky-Peneski said. After hearing the preliminary findings, the council weighed different options and a majority felt firing Wolf without cause was the best option, city council member Dean Dekker said.

The city council voted 8-2 to fire Wolf without cause, with Joe Heidemann and Trey Mitchell opposing the move. Many people in the audience at the meeting also opposed the move.

City leaders have said little about the findings of the nearly two-month investigation, citing personnel matters, but Mayor Ryan Sorenson said it uncovered “significant” concerns, including Wolf making false statements and becoming a legal liability for the city.

The city chose to fire Wolf without cause, rather than for cause, to save money and “minimize the negative impact on both Wolf and other city employees,” according to the city council resolution.

Firing Wolf for cause would have increased the city’s legal fees and drawn out the process longer, Sorenson said.

“Once the report becomes public, I hope folks will understand the difficult decision that the city council had to make tonight,” he said.

The preliminary investigation report will become public, but Sorenson does not know when. “I hope it comes sooner than later,” he said.

Because Wolf was fired without cause, the city will pay him six months’ salary — nearly \$79,000 — and benefits.

The Sheboygan Press is seeking comment from Wolf’s attorney.

### **Wolf made Sheboygan vulnerable to lawsuits, mayor says**

Sorenson said at this point, he cannot comment on most findings of the investigation.

A letter that Wolf emailed to the city council on Nov. 7, hours before the council voted to put him on administrative leave, “raised a lot of red flags,” including statements that “can be proven false” with other documentation, Sorenson said.

In the letter, Wolf made “strong accusations” that he was extorted by members of the community at an Oct. 5 meeting. Sorenson said the community members did not demand money at that meeting, where there were other city staff present. The community members have denied the allegation publicly and issued a cease-and-desist letter to the city, which put the city “in a significant legal situation,” Sorenson said.

Sheboygan already faces one open case from the former human resources director, who resigned in June after filing a complaint with the state Equal Rights Division alleging Wolf discriminated against her.

Sorenson added: “There were many different communications where Administrator Wolf was told that some of his comments are not true, and he kept doubling down on comments, even knowing that they weren’t true, so that was another component that gave us significant pause.”

Wolf also did not follow instructions from the council while on leave, Sorenson said.

“When you conduct an investigation like this, you ask that person not to interfere with it. You say … keep it to yourself right now, and … there were multiple violations of that,” he said.

**More:** ‘People are angry’: Sheboygan residents, elected officials respond to city administrator’s handling of director repeating a racial slur

## **People claim Wolf's firing was political. Here's how elected officials across the spectrum responded.**

Many people at the city council meeting opposed the decision to fire Wolf, especially without cause.

“This (without cause) leads me to understand — and I think everybody else in the room — that this (investigation) did not find any problems with the city administrator’s conduct,” former mayor Mike Vandersteen said.

Vandersteen said Wolf has worked “transparently and diligently” and made many notable accomplishments as administrator.

“Did Todd Wolf steal money? … Is he a target of a witch hunt? The council has said nothing,” said Aaron Guenther, who is running for a city council seat in April. “I demand that you release the investigation … to the public because we deserve to know.”

Russ Otten said the council wants to fire Wolf because they “don’t like the way he stood up to the demands of a far-left group.” Otten, chairman of the Republican Party of Sheboygan County, encouraged party members to attend the meeting to stand against corruption.

**More:** Here are the candidates running for Sheboygan, Plymouth and Sheboygan Falls seats in the 2023 spring election

Dekker said the decision was “in no way, shape or form political,” despite audience members’ comments.

“Personally, after hearing the synopsis, and weighing the options before us, I have to come to the conclusion that this is in the best interest of our employees,” Dekker said. “To take care of our employees is important to us. One employee doesn’t stand over all the rest of our employees. To put our employees through something like this is not right.”

Sorenson similarly said, after the vote, “Personnel issues are not supposed to become political issues, and I’m sad that it came down to that.”

"Nobody wants to do this. Todd and I got along great professionally," Sorenson said. "He made some decisions that put the city in a very difficult situation, and actions have consequences. People should feel safe to come to work. People shouldn't have to be fearful of retaliation. People should have to come to work in a professional manner."

Heidemann, who made an unsuccessful motion for the council to give Wolf a "written warning" instead of firing him, said the investigation "was far from conclusive."

Heidemann said he cannot comment on closed session, but he said the decision is not fair to Wolf.

"Bring that out in the open, let the citizens decide," he said. "They (other council members) don't want to do that because they can hide behind closed session. That's not good governance."

Mitchell, the other city council member to vote against firing Wolf, said he did not think the move was morally just and Sheboygan "is better off having had" Wolf.

"Given the public nature of last night's action, I do not believe it completely qualified as a confidential, internal personnel matter anymore," Mitchell said in an email. He could not share more information about the matter because it was discussed in closed session meetings, he wrote.

**More:** Plymouth settles lawsuit of former city administrator Jordan Skiff, who was fired 9 months into the job

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# Sheboygan Press.

## NEWS

# 13 people, including Sheboygan mayor, named in lawsuit by former city administrator



**Kelli Arseneau**

Appleton Post-Crescent

Published 5:03 a.m. CT Feb. 13, 2023

A former Sheboygan city administrator is suing 13 people, including the city's mayor, in connection with his firing in January.

The Sheboygan City Council fired Todd Wolf Jan. 9 following an investigation into his conduct. In a complaint filed Feb. 6 in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Wisconsin, Wolf alleges Sheboygan's mayor and a majority of the City Council members launched the investigation "without any legitimate justification" and had help from Sheboygan Press reporter Maya Hilty "to make sure that his stature in the community was destroyed."

A spokesperson from Gannett Corp., which owns the Press, said, "We do not comment on ongoing litigation."

The preliminary investigation report has not yet been made public. While specific details about the investigation have not been released, in January Mayor Ryan Sorenson told the Sheboygan Press Wolf's actions as city administrator made the city vulnerable to lawsuits.

The city chose to fire Wolf without cause, rather than for cause, to save money and "minimize the negative impact on both Wolf and other city employees," according to the city council resolution.

Named as defendants in the lawsuit are Sorenson, the city of Sheboygan, city attorney Charles Adams, Sheboygan Area School District President Mary Lynne Donohue, Hilty, council members Barbara Felde, Roberta Filicky-Peneski, Amanda Salazar, Angela Ramey, Betty Ackley, Zachary Rust, Dean Dekker, Grazia Perrella, and attorney Jill Hall, who

conducted the investigation into Wolf's conduct.

The complaint, submitted by Wolf's attorney Jennifer DeMaster, claims Wolf was targeted by the Sheboygan Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging Initiative, which in 2021 "installed certain individuals into trusted positions on the Common Council, the Mayoral seat, and one reporter at a local newspaper." Sheboygan DEIB-affiliated elected officials then worked "in conjunction to destroy Mr. Wolf's reputation with fabricated allegations and remove him as City Administrator without any chance for due process," the complaint alleges.

In the complaint, Wolf requests compensatory damages for "lost income and benefits, severe mental and emotional distress, loss of reputation, humiliation and inconvenience," as well as punitive damages against the defendants. He also requests declarations that defendants violated his First Amendment rights and his 14th Amendment due process rights, and a trial by jury.

No court proceedings related to the lawsuit have yet been scheduled.

**RELATED:** Sheboygan city administrator fired after investigation. His supporters want details why.

**RELATED:** Former Sheboygan human resources director alleges she was retaliated against for opposing sexual harassment in the workplace

*Contact Kelli Arseneau at (920) 213-3721 or [karseneau@gannett.com](mailto:karseneau@gannett.com). Follow her on Twitter at @ArseneauKelli.*



JUSTICE & SAFETY

# Top Sheboygan officials lacked key details on police department sexual harassment probes

*Citizen oversight board was not involved in reviewing police investigation; mayor says he was unaware independent review ordered by city had been halted*



by **Maya Hilty / Sheboygan Press and Phoebe Petrovic / Wisconsin Watch**

February 27th, 2023

Why you can trust Wisconsin Watch



The Sheboygan Police Department building is seen on Nov. 8, 2022 in Sheboygan, Wis. (Coburn Dukehart / Wisconsin Watch)

**Reading Time:** 7 minutes

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Case 2:23-cv-01048-WED Filed 03/04/25 Page 26 of 34 Document 128-4

SHEBOYGAN — Key city officials say they were left in the dark at various points during and after three 2021 internal investigations into sexual harassment by the Sheboygan Police Department.

The Sheboygan Press and Wisconsin Watch first [\*\*reported on the existence and results of the sexual harassment investigations\*\*](#), which included discipline or verbal reprimands for a dozen officers on Feb. 6. The city also settled a discrimination complaint related to sexual harassment with a female officer for \$110,000.

The police oversight board, a five-citizen commission that can decide to hear and act on complaints publicly, was out of the loop, former president Robert Lettre told the news outlets. The city also discontinued an external review of the police investigations that city leaders had initially agreed upon.

The state Department of Workforce Development (DWD) later found probable cause to believe recently fired city administrator Todd Wolf retaliated against former Human Resources Director Vicky Schneider over her concerns about how the investigations were handled. The finding advances the case to either a settlement agreement or an evidentiary hearing presided over by an administrative law judge.

Over the past few months, city leaders have been updating policies they hope will prevent future harassment and better respond to any future complaints as the fallout from those probes continues.

Bryan Pray, the officer who received the steepest penalty, a two-week unpaid suspension, resigned Feb. 8 — two days after the story was published and over a year after the conclusion of the internal probes. The investigations focused on misconduct including sharing semi-nude photos of co-workers without their knowledge or consent.

## Addressing police culture top priority

Sheboygan's new human resources director, Adam Westbrook, said the path forward includes improving the culture at the police department, in which "dark humor" and "inappropriate" statements and behavior were tolerated — a situation he noted is not unique to Sheboygan.

"There was a culture at the police department that allowed for that type of behavior to happen," Westbrook said. "There has to be a shift that says 'This is not OK.' "

"The second thing is rebuilding trust, and that's what I'm trying to do. Because I feel like employees and police officers, whether rightfully or wrongfully, feel like if they report something, nothing is going to happen... (I) have been very clear that I want to know bad things that are happening so that I can address them."



Officer Bryan Pray resigned two days after a Feb. 6, 2023 report from Wisconsin Watch and the Sheboygan Press revealed Pray sexually harassed at least two female officers at the Sheboygan Police Department and was not truthful with supervisors, among other policy violations. (Courtesy of the Wisconsin Department of Justice in 2020)



Sheboygan Police Chief Christopher Domagalski takes the oath of office on Jan. 18, 2010, from city clerk Sue Richards during a ceremony at Sheboygan City Hall in Sheboygan, Wis. A citizen complaint was filed on Feb. 14 regarding his and other supervisors' handling of the sexual harassment investigations. Sheboygan human resources director Adam Westbrook said the complaint lacked enough information to warrant investigation. (Gary C. Klein / USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin)

Moving forward, any allegation of harassment, discrimination or retaliation will be investigated separately by the human resources department and the police department, Westbrook said.

On Feb. 14, a citizen complaint was filed with the police department against Chief Christopher Domagalski, Capt. Kurt Zempel, recently promoted to assistant chief, and Capt. James Veeser for their handling of the original sexual harassment investigations, citing Wisconsin Watch and the Sheboygan Press's reporting.

Two days later, Westbrook responded in writing that the complaint could not be investigated "based on the lack of information provided," but the complainant could submit a new complaint to human resources with more detail or appeal to the Police and Fire Commission.

**MORE ON THIS TOPIC**



**Sheboygan anti-abuse group calls for accountability from police department**



**Widespread sexual harassment draws discipline, resignations in Wisconsin police department**

Investigation of a more recent complaint related to sexual harassment at the police department closed in February after investigators found it was not true and did not happen, Westbrook said.

**City launched external review, which never finished**

One step the city did take was to hire a law firm in July 2021 to investigate the police department's handling of the allegations after Schneider raised concerns. But the review was discontinued when a female officer filed a sex discrimination complaint with the DWD.

That was news to Mayor Ryan Sorenson, who said he did not know the attorneys' investigation was halted.

"I was trusting our team that this was being handled correctly and obviously best practices weren't followed, so I was very upset by that," he said. "I guess I fully don't understand why it (the outside review) stopped."

The mayor said he is not normally involved in personnel issues; after making the decision to hire outside attorneys, responsibility for the review passed to the human resources department, city administrator and city attorney's office.

**City administrator alleged to have downplayed concerns**

Schneider, the former city human resources director, filed a complaint with the state Equal Rights Division in January 2022 against the city claiming discrimination. Schneider's case, which is pending, alleged then-city administrator Wolf downplayed her concerns about the police department's response to sexual harassment complaints.



Todd Wolf speaks at the ribbon cutting at Meijer on April 25, 2019, in Sheboygan, Wis. The city council hired Wolf as city administrator in 2020 and fired him without explanation in January 2023. (Gary C. Klein / USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin)

Wolf instead “sought to discredit the female officers involved” and told Schneider not to get involved in the investigation or to inform the city council about the sexual harassment complaints, her attorney wrote in filings to the state DWD. James Macy, the attorney hired by the city to defend it against Schneider’s employment discrimination complaint, declined to comment further on the pending case but said no discrimination occurred.

Schneider took leave from November 2021 until March 2022, when the benefit ran out, [resigning in early June](#).

In early January, [the council fired Wolf](#), citing no reasons, after hearing additional, unrelated concerns about his conduct. The city has declined to release its preliminary investigation report but Sorenson told the Sheboygan Press that Wolf’s actions as city administrator made the city vulnerable to lawsuits.

The city chose to fire Wolf without cause, rather than for cause, to save money and “minimize the negative impact on both Wolf and other city employees,” according to the city council resolution.

On Feb. 6, Wolf [sued 13 people](#), including the mayor, city council members and Sheboygan Press reporter Maya Hilty, in connection with his firing, which he contends was unjustified.

## **Police and Fire Commission not involved**

In 2021, Lettre, then-president of the Sheboygan Board of Police and Fire Commissioners, also raised concerns about the sexual harassment investigations.

The commission holds trial-like hearings on complaints filed against police officers, if concerns remain after those complaints are dealt with internally. Complaints can be filed with the commission by a member of the commission, the police chief or any aggrieved person.

The commission decides appropriate discipline for officers, including the chief of police, if the charges are sustained.

Lettre said a female officer contacted him in 2021 saying she had made a sexual harassment complaint that was inadequately addressed by the department. Lettre then met with the police chief, the mayor, city administrator and city attorney.

"It seemed like they were more interested in hiding the fact that there had been what was going on in the police department with sexual harassment ... than really addressing the problem," he said.

Lettre said he "never had a chance to pursue" the officer's concerns because in the spring of 2022, he was removed from the commission.

Sheboygan Mayor Ryan Sorenson speaks at a ribbon cutting on May 2, 2022, in Sheboygan Wis. Sorenson says he was not told that an independent investigation into the Sheboygan Police Department's handling of three sexual harassment probes had been suspended.  
(Gary C. Klein / USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin)

According to Lettre, Sorenson told him in April that the police chief thought Lettre should not be reappointed at the end of his five-year term.

"I kind of laughed at him. I said, 'What's the police chief got to do with you reappointing?'" Lettre later told a reporter, saying that "goes against" the intent of the state law establishing police and fire commissions to oversee police chiefs and departments.

Sorenson said the chief did not influence his decision but both the police and fire chiefs "gave some good perspective that kind of confirmed my decision." Sorenson said he did not reappoint Lettre because he campaigned on making new appointments to city boards, and Lettre had already served 25 years on the commission.

While president of the commission, Lettre said he was not aware of the city's external review of the police department's investigation, although he "certainly" thinks the city should have informed him of that. He added that the commission knew "almost nothing" about the sexual harassment complaints at the department.

Andy Hopp, the current president, declined to discuss the department's harassment investigations or the city's external review, adding he cannot comment on matters discussed in closed session.

Hopp also declined to comment on whether the female officer's allegations about supervisors and the chief of police failing to take her complaints seriously warrant further investigation.

### **Police misconduct remained out of public view**

The police department redacted more than 70 pages of the reports obtained by the Sheboygan Press and Wisconsin Watch, along with the names of all but two of the 12 officers who were disciplined or verbally admonished.

Domagalski wrote that full disclosure would discourage officers from cooperating in future investigations and undermine the privacy of those who participated. He also wrote it would hinder the city's ability to recruit and retain officers by causing a loss of morale and limiting their opportunities for "satisfying careers and fair treatment."

Four pages from a Sheboygan Police Department internal investigation report in 2021 show an interview with Officer Bryan Pray, about half of which is redacted, and the beginning of an entirely redacted interview with an officer identified as Officer 15. Both Pray and Officer 15, identified by the Sheboygan Press and Wisconsin Watch as Stephen Schnabel, were found to have sexually harassed colleagues. (Sheboygan Police Department)

Chuck Adams, the city attorney, initially said the city would not release the settlement agreement with the female officer but later provided it.

Employment attorney Nola Cross, who was not involved in the investigations or complaints, said efforts by a city to hide what happens with public money is a violation of public trust.

Additionally, anyone contemplating applying to the Sheboygan Police Department should “easily” be able to know the department’s record on sexual harassment, such how many settlements there have been and how many complaints have been filed, Cross said.

“That’s one of the reasons there’s so much pervasive sexual harassment ... in non-traditional female positions,” she said. “It doesn’t see the light of day. There’s no sunlight on these cases.”

*This is a collaboration by the Sheboygan Press and the nonprofit Wisconsin Watch, ([www.WisconsinWatch.org](http://www.WisconsinWatch.org)), which collaborates with WPR, PBS Wisconsin, other news media and the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Journalism and Mass Communication. All works created, published, posted or disseminated by Wisconsin Watch do not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of UW-Madison or any of its affiliates.*

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